

Feared now, but revered then

THE SNAKE WHO WAS GOD

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SNAKE PITS AND REPTILE PENS are one of the most visited and sought-after areas in zoos. Children continue to be fascinated by everything slithery, and humans have been intrigued by the mysterious powers of the skin-shedding venom-harbouring reptile since the dawn of history.

The snake occupies a peculiar place in the modern globalised world, and particularly within the parts of it still influenced by one form or another of Judaeo-Christian heritage. Today, images of snakes directly recall to mind associations with evil, the devil, the fall of a once-beautiful angel, or the expulsion from Eden. The iconic depiction of the serpent in Genesis being the cause of the eternal curse on itself and humans are inescapable to anyone who has grown up within a culture in touch with Biblical heritage. The following lines from Genesis will be familiar to such readers:

"Then the Lord God said to the woman, 'What is this you have done?'

The woman said, 'The serpent deceived me, and I ate.'

So the Lord God said to the serpent, 'Because you have done this, cursed are you above all livestock and all wild animals! You will crawl on your belly and you will eat dust all the days of your life.'"

(Genesis 3:13–14).

The snake was not always regarded as a symbol of evil, danger or fallibility, however. In ancient cultures which predate the Old Testament – and particularly within ancient Egyptian mythology – the snake was largely admired and associated with good magic and positive energy.

(TOP IMAGE) A drawing of an ostracon (limestone flake containing an inscription) from Deir el-Bahari featuring the 19th-Dynasty royal tomb-builder, Khnummose, adoring the local cobra-goddess Meretseger. This deity dwelt on the mountain that overlooked the Valley of the Kings where Khnummose worked. This piece, collected from Thebes in 1818, was purchased by the British Museum in 1843 (Acc. No. EA8510).